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ABSTRACT

A review of writing and reading competencies among college students in general and education majors in particular indicates possible directions in setting teacher education admission standards, in providing language instruction courses for student teachers, and in establishing criteria for exiting teacher education programs. As is suggested by falling college entrance examination scores, the small amount of written work demanded by most colleges, and many college students' reluctance to write, many colege students are often deficient in writing and reading skills. Recent research has shown that the majority of students seeking admission to certain teacher education programs were writing at or below the ninth grade level on the Fry Readability Scale, while education majors' reading competency scores declined from 1967 to 1977, especially among prospective elementary school teachers. Studies of practicing teachers' reading competencies have indicated mediocre to poor results in comparison to those of college freshmen. Other investigations have shown that the quantity and quality of leisure and professional material read by teachers was low. In an effort to upgrade the teacher force, competency testing for initial teacher certification has been initiated in many states. (MM)

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Should Teacher Training Institutions Be Concerned About the Reading and Writing Skills of Future Teachers?

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Introduction

The issue of basic skills proficiency in reading and writing of students at all levels of preparation has risen to the level of a national preoccupation. Every person, in some way, knows something about education. This may not make everyone an expert in the field, but expertise in this area does not necessarily preclude criticism. State legislators, parents, teachers, businessmen, professors, and even retired navy admirals, publicly express their concern and openly blame teachers and their teacher training institutions for the state of student competency. Our student teachers are coming to teacher training institutions from the same public school systems which are under attack. If, in fact, student competency is as poor as critics claim, teacher educators have great cause for concern. A look at the state of these competencies should enable us to better understand the concerns about student teachers' proficiencies in writing and reading skills. It should provide us with direction in teacher admission standards, in providing language instruction courses for student teachers, and in setting criteria for exiting the teacher education program.

Teacher education institutions and organizations need to provide research into the competencies of teacher education applicants. Such research will either verify the criticism and give direction to revising

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standards for admission and upgrading program, or it will lay to rest unjustified blame of teachers.

Writing and Reading Skills at the Post-Secondary Level

According to Robert Cameron, Program Service Officer, Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB) "the general consensus at post-secondary institutions is that students today are obviously unprepared in the basic skills of written and oral communications."[3] The American College Testing Program (ACT) has reported a consistent decline in average scores over the past thirteen years. The most significant standard score decline has occurred in the social studies reading subtest. The English and mathematics subtest scores have experienced some decline, but not to the extent of the social studies subtest. The natural sciences subtest has experienced no decline.

In the specific area of writing, two additional problems seem to surface: the amount of written work assigned or expected in college content area studies, and the reluctance of college students to write. A study of 173 college freshmen at Yale University showed that, in general, students reported writing "formal essays" more frequently during their last year of secondary school than during freshman year at Yale. A positive correlation between frequency of writing in secondary school and first semester English grades was found.[7] Gere,[6] at the University of Washington, interviewed students majoring in twenty-four randomly selected areas and found a great variety in the amount of writing requried within and across disciplines. Of the departments included in the sample, Comparative Literature, English, and Women Studies

required the most writing, but actual amounts varied with the instructor. Departments such as Political Science, Art and Communications fell in the middle range of assigned writing. Scientific and technical departments required little or no writing. The students' attitude toward writing was exemplified by the fact that students in some disciplines claimed that by carefully selecting courses and instructors, they could avoid extended writing altogether. Students attitudes were also explored at the University of Mississippi. Ronald Schroeder, director of the sophomore literature program had his students comment on their writing attitudes in a course evaluation. More than three-fourths of the students in the class told him that they felt that they were at a disadvantage when they took essay exams. The felt they could not write well enough. Students confessed, in support of the Washington study, that amount of writing was among the criteria they used in selecting their courses and teachers. Schroeder feels that "Too many students...have the mistaken notion that writing is something isolated from the learning process, that writing is distinct and separate from something else that they conceive to be a body of objective knowledge.." [15]

If these are the conditions of academic preparation of students who are entering the teacher education program, we have great cause for concern. In a recent study at Colorado State University, Hodges found that in a sample of 117 students seeking admission to teacher education programs, 83 wrote an assigned essay at the 9th grade level, or below, on the Fry Readability Scale. Twenty-seven students indicated serious spelling deficiencies. Five did not follow instructions for completing the assignment in that they could not, or did not, write in the essay format, but wrote disjointed sentences unconnected by transition words.

Hodges also found that 97 of the sample had never before written an annotated bibliography, and that upon completion of such an assignment she made, 37 failed to follow the printed sample. She also found that of the 117 annotated bibliographies completed, fifty-three had serious spelling or mechanical errors. Only five students indicated that they had prepared a long paper on a topic in their major field of study while at that institution.[9]

If these figures are indicative of the general population of students seeking admission to teacher education program, it would seem that more attention needs to be paid to writing in the students' content classes and that students need more required courses in writing. Further research needs to be done to find just how widespread these deficits are.

Studies of Education Majors' Reading Competencies

Studies of reading competencies of education majors have shown the following results. In 1967, 205 prospective education majors (107 sophomores, 75 juniors, 13 seniors, and 8 unclassified students) were tested in a study by Cline[1] at the University of Colorado, using the Nelson-Denny Reading Test. It was found that, using the percentile ranks between the fourteenth and fifteenth years of school, vocabulary proficiency ranked at 59%, comprehension at 64% and the total reading score at 62%. This study was replicated by Hodges[9] at Colorado State University in 1977, 1978, and 1979. She found that the students in 1977 ranked at the 43% in vocabulary proficiency, 52% in comprehension, and 48% in total score. The 1978 group ranked at the 37% in vocabulary, 48% in comprehension, and 43% in total score. In 1979, she found that scores had declined even further. This group scored at the 35% in vocabulary, 47% in comprehension, and 42% in total score. Since the overall population of the two univer-

are similar in demography, one may make the assumption that difference in language instruction of these students in the intervening 10 year period between studies made the difference in abilities. In all four studies prospective senior high school teachers were found to be more verbally skilled than prospective primary teachers. Cline found in her study of fifty-seven elementary education majors, fifty-two percent were found to be functionally illiterate in reading basal textbooks teacher's manuals. Although the elementary majors at the University of Colorado in 1967 cannot be compared with the elementary majors at Colorado State University in 1977 in the same way, it should be of concern that elementary teachers are not faring as well as high school teachers. Ninety percent of children's reading instruction takes place in the elementary school rather than in high school, yet these teachers read far less well themselves. In the 1977, 1978, 1979 studies of elementary teachers at Colorado State University, Hodges concluded that the fact that this institution qualifies only art, music, and physical education majors for elementary certification may have had an effect on their reading test scores since reading is not used as much in these majors as it is in others. Therefore, these teachers would not have had the practice in reading that a social studies, science, or English major may have had, or that an elementary education major at the University of Colorado preparing to be a regular classroom teacher might have had.

Mikulecky and Ribavich[12] studied 149 students, graduate and undergraduate, enrolled in reading methods courses at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In comparing the students' scores with the sixteenth

grade norms of the Nelson-Denny Reading Test, the percentile ranks were as follows: in vocabulary, 66%; in comprehension, 60%; and a total score of 63%. The reading skills of 387 seniors in secondary education programs at Kent State University were studies using the Diagnostic Reading Tests, Survey Section: Upper Level. Although most of the scores obtained were well above the average college freshman level, 15% of the sample population read below the level of 3/4 of the college freshman group.[17]

Studies of Practicing Teachers' Reading Competencies

Practicing teachers have also been studied in the area of reading proficiency. Geeslin and York[4] administered the Nelson-Denny to several groups of teachers participating in in-service training programs. The mean score of comprehension for one group of teachers was at the 9.6 grade level. The mean comprehension score for another group was at the 8.8 grade level. Dahlke[2] administered the Diagnostic Reading Survey Test to four in-service reading classes, two in Florida and two in Wisconsin. The main cluster of scores for both groups fell in the 0-9th percentile range for total comprehension when college freshman norms were used. In vocabulary, the Florida group performed at the 30th-39th percentile range. Gentile and McMillan[5] conducted a four and one-half year long study of 348 teachers' reading skills. All were practicing teachers enrolled in graduate programs. The Cooperative English Reading Test was used. The results show that 28% of the teachers scored lower in vocabulary than did ½ of the norm (a freshman population), 49% scored lower in comprehension and 56% read slower and with less understanding.

In studies by Mueller,[13] Hawkins,[8] Roeder,[14] and by Ilika,[11] attitudes of practicing teachers have been assessed in several studies. It was concluded from these findings that the quantitiy and quality of both leisure and professional materials read was indeed low. If this is any indication of value placed on reading, then teachers do not seem to be reading very highly. The matter of teachers' reading habits is important. Men and women who profess to be educating young people should themselves value and use reading as a regular part of their daily lives. Hodges[9] found in a survey of first year teachers in the fall of 1982 that 67% had not read a book in the last year. Five of the number in the sample (87 teachers) admitted to not ever having read a book in their lifetimes. One industrial sciences teacher said, "I have gotten this far without ever reading anything, even in college. Why should I start now?" Needless to say, his scores on the McGraw-Hill Reading Test were in the lower 10% for comprehension and in the 2% for rate.

Competency-based Teacher Certification

The testing of teachers for basic skills proficiency and subject matter mastery seems to be evolving as the next logical step in the effort to improve public education. In an attempt to upgrade the teaching force, several school districts have devised testing procedures for screening applicants, and some have even proposed testing their present staffs. The primary focus of the teacher competency testing movement, though, is in the area of initial cerfification. Teacher certification procedures are under scrutiny in many states. As of 1978,

five states were using the National Teacher Examination (NTE) scores for certification purposes. Several other state legislatures have since introduced bills incorporating testing of teachers for certification.

In examining the teacher competency testing activities of fourteen states as of 1978 and part of 1979, some common points became apparent:

Most states will or have been requiring some form of testing for initial certification, whether the NTE or some other state developed standardized test.

Testing emphasis has been on the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic, as well as subject matter expertise.

Competency testing requirements are being extended beyond the classroom teacher to all certified personnel, including principals and superintendents.

There has been increased interest in establishing a paid, first year internship prior to any type of certification.

Most legislatures have entrusted the responsibility of establishing rules, regulations and standards for certification and testing upon the state departments of education.

There has appeared to be a definite trend toward having teacher preparation programs be accountable to the state for the adequate preparation of prospective teachers.

Some state teacher training institutions have developed their own competency testing and admissions standards.

There has been high interest in the past of state legislatures, state boards of education and teacher organizations in changing the present method of teacher certification. Nevertheless, the revision of certification procedures has not been a peaceful process in most states. Florida and Louisiana are examples where legislation has resulted in battles between education organizations and legislatures. New York State has had the

issue of certification standards under consideration since 1975. In five states certification legislation has been stalled in committee and will be carried over to the next legislative session.

The public concern over teacher competency must be acknowledge and acted upon by professional teacher organizations, teacher training institutions, and state departments of education. A number of Alabama legislators announced at a state board of education meeting that either the board acts to establish a plan to assess teacher competencies in the basic skills or "legislation will be forthcoming." This sums up public attitude toward the teaching profession and teacher training.

Summary

Grave concerns have been raised about the quality of education being provided by the public schools. These concerns have more recently been extended to include the preparation of prospective teachers and the competencies they may or may not be able to exhibit once they begin their teaching careers. A review of recent investigative studies indicates that many students leaving our classrooms do not possess adequate reading and writing skills. The research shows that students do not write in colleges and universities, and that they, in turn, go out to teach students who may, in turn,go to colleges and universities where they take few writing courses or write in few classes in their content areas. Studies of education majors and practicing teachers in the area of reading skills have shown, for the most part, mediocre to poor results. Studies have also shown that the quality and quantity of materials read by these two groups to be below the expectations of the researchers.

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